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Police Officers with Degrees: The plan, challenges and (missing) evidence

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In early September 2015, I was fortunate enough to be present at one of the first consultations of the College of Policing's 'Education Qualifications Framework' (EQF). Yesterday (13th November 2015), these plans were announced in the national press. This piece explores the consultation and what this may mean for policing.

Introduction

College of Policing's (CoPs), Dr Sam Peach, led the presentation on the proposed educational qualification framework and outlined several reasons why higher education and policing should work together, being able to utilize an evidence-base for instance.

Dr Peach then moved on to present the plans for an educational qualification framework – it is these plans that have today sent the press and Twitter into a frenzy – plans for all police constables to have degrees.

Since CoPs plans have been announced, and throughout today, it has been widely speculated what CoP truly meant by these plans. Policing commentator, Cate Moore commented:

"It appears that many people think the College are proposing that a degree is an entry requirement. I'm fairly sure this is not the case" (Moore, 2015)¹

Unless their plans have changed from their initial consultation I can confirm – yes, this really is the case.

What does the EQF look like?

CoP proposed several tiers of educational qualification that ascended with rank and began at Apprentice Constable/PCSO level upwards. For instance, a constable would be considered at a practitioner level and would need a minimum degree qualification. A sergeant would be considered a supervisor and advanced practitioner and would need to be qualified to PGCert level at a minimum. At the top, a Chief Constable would be expected to have a Masters degree at a minimum but should be working towards a professional doctorate or PhD. From constables upwards there would be an expectation of continuing professional development and specialist learning across all ranks.

In itself the EQF seems logical. It addresses the practical, tactical, strategic and leadership needs of officers at all ranks. It also introduces flexible, direct and re-entry options and could indicate the opportunity for officers to leave and re-enter the policing profession. There is a great deal of support for degree-level education and the benefits it brings to workplaces and the economy.

However, there are several concerns that exist in relation to the proposals. Some of these concerns, for me, include:

Possibility of a policing specific degree being mandated

Initially the consultations specifically stated that Constables would need to apply with a policing degree. The room accommodated an assortment of police leaders, police staff, and, predominantly, academics – yet I felt this was not being received well by the majority.

The work of myself and colleagues in supporting forces to adapt to budget cuts, has identified that forces feel they need to be up-skilled to deal with modern crime (confirmed extensively by others). A policing degree may lead to a common curriculum dealing with the practitioner aspect of the constable role (statements, interviewing, case files), risking specialist skills and knowledge. For

¹ <https://policinginsight.com/opinion/policing-by-degrees-does-the-colleges-own-evidence-add-up/>

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instance, we hear that more sophisticated responses to online crimes are required, in which case graduates with skills and knowledge from a computer science degree might better meet the current concerns of policing.

Are CoP underestimating the value of diverse graduates?

A conversion programme from a non-policing degree was one possibility CoP wished to explore.

Risk for Aspiring Officers

Within the proposals, CoP made clear that aspiring Constables would have to pay for their own university education (as much as we can say that they do pay their own with current tuition fee regimes). After completing a degree individuals would need to apply to a Constable position as per the standard recruitment process with no guarantee of being appointed.

This does add fuel to the fire for some critics who see this as an exercise to displace training costs from organisations to individuals (a benefit presented by CoP themselves).

Lack of Evidence behind the EQF in general

Whilst, CoP identified the benefits of the evidence-base available through higher education engagement there is little evidence to suggest that this evidence-base has made its way into their decision-making. CoP were asked in the consultation whether they had any evidence that supported degrees for policing. The answer was an indirect no (as they loosely cited policing in other countries, and concluded, in effect, that it works for nursing).

Do 'outstanding' officers have degrees? (define outstanding!)

Are the benefits of degree education relevant to constables?

Assumptions about the benefits of graduates in a policing context?

CoP also suggested that through the framework they would have officers with a hunger for professional development, able to use the evidence base, and who were critical thinkers.

Have officers access to evidence bases?

Do we need our entire policing complement to have degrees and all be critical

thinkers?

Do undergraduates really leave University with a strong sense of professional endeavor?

Access to University education

Barriers to degree level education do exist and there are still ongoing widening participation efforts throughout higher education institutions – *reportedly, £735m² in widening access activity this academic year in the UK*. Ethnicity, gender and socio-economic factors have been found to affect access into, and progress through, higher education.

Might already disadvantaged groups become isolated? (for instance, might those in lower socio-economic groups stop aspiring to be constables?)

Further Research

There is much opportunity for further research to determine whether degree qualifications actually do enhance policing. For instance, work to understand the educational history of our ‘outstanding officers’ and whether degree benefits are relevant, applicable and culturally acceptable to the role of police officers and to policing. It is this missing evidence that I believe CoP need to support their decision-making.

However, contrary to an evidence-based approach, the wheels truly feel like they are in motion with regard to the education qualification framework. Despite the early concerns from what should have been the warmest group – the academics – it doesn’t seem CoP are pausing for thought, and it most certainly doesn’t seem that they will be revisiting the drawing board.

² <http://schoolsImprovement.net/universities-remain-a-hive-of-inequality-they-must-do-more-to-attract-the-excluded/>